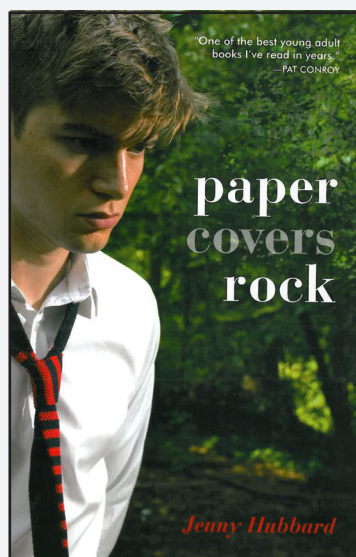


Second Reaction: Searching for Words, Searching for Identity

Hubbard, Jenny. *Paper Covers Rock*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2011.

Heather Scarano



In *Paper Covers Rock*, Jenny Hubbard brings to life the inner struggles of Alex, or as he invites the reader to call him, “Is Male,” a junior at an all boys’ boarding school in the early 1980s. As the title character’s self-imposed, ambiguous name might suggest, much of Hubbard’s novel centers on Alex’s search for self. While grappling with his own actions, beliefs, and identity, Alex also faces the challenge of coming to terms with the guilt he feels, and the secrets he harbors, surrounding the drowning of Thomas, a classmate and friend.

The story unfolds in an epistolary fashion, where through a series of diary entries, Alex relays not only the struggles he goes through as he lives with the growing guilt and questions surrounding his friend’s death, but also his daily thoughts on everything from literature to alienation, to sexuality and his own adolescent sexual desires. Written to the “dear reader,” this book allows its audience to see the inner workings of a young male trying to come to terms with numerous aspects of life, death, and sense of self.

Paper Covers Rock addresses many different issues and topics of concern to today’s young adults, and has an air of authenticity and frankness in tone and use of language that adolescents may find refreshing. While the use of language and discussion of sexuality and sexual desires may be questionable to some, they are by no means arbitrary.

When explored within the context of Alex's experiences, as well as those of his friends and classmates, they may even provide a platform with which to understand and talk openly about the thoughts, issues, and experiences facing teens today. As a text in the classroom, this book opens up a number of possibilities for contemplation and discussion.

Much of what we see in the text shows us how one person copes with guilt and loss. This sentiment permeates the story, and though loss and guilt are often hard topics to broach, they are still important to discuss. Though students won't necessarily feel the guilt Alex does, guilt, to some degree, is a feeling with which we are all familiar. Letting students explore the topic of guilt—why we feel guilty, what we feel guilty about, etc.—can open up a space for discussion and introspection.

As Alex's diary entries unfold, we see how writing becomes an integral part of how he makes sense of his life and actions, as well as those of his friends. As one of Alex's entries so eloquently puts it, "searching for words is comparable to searching for identity" (79). Such eloquence of language also manifests itself in the poems Alex writes and intersperses in his entries.

What we see here is the power of writing *through* and *about* one's experiences and emotions. Such action on the part of this character is certainly a topic for discussion with students. Having students reflect on and write about their own experiences, or reflect on and react to the book itself, Alex's experiences, or the way he writes, may be an avenue to help them think critically about and consider their own experience and identities. It would also be worthwhile to have students study Alex's poems, or write their own, either in the same vein, or in other contexts. Even writing poems about their own experiences and thoughts *while* reading the text would help them to connect with and think critically and contemplatively about the work.

Within Alex's diary entries, sexuality is one topic author Hubbard explores, and one that Alex's English teacher, Miss Dovecott, intimates could be related to Thomas's death. There are moments in his diary entries where Alex discusses homosexuality—from a class discussion about Walt Whitman, to a moment where his friend Glenn tries to kiss him. With each of these often short parts of the story, the reader sees not only Alex's reaction, but the reactions of others as well.

In a time when adolescents are searching for their identities, it is important that classrooms become a safe place for them to do so. Within a classroom setting, one could use these elements of the text as a way to not only discuss the work itself, but as a bridge to discuss tolerance and acceptance, while also addressing real world examples and issues that students face. Here too, writing has a place and can serve as an outlet for students.

If a teacher determines to use *Paper Covers Rock* with students, it would be important to prepare for an open, honest, and mature discussion of the text. It is for these reasons that this text may work best with high school students (sophomore level). While one could

argue there is some room for character development, Hubbard discusses relevant issues ripe for discussion.

About the Author

Heather Scarano is a former high school English teacher and is currently a doctoral student at Purdue University. Her current research interests include young adult literature and the construction of character identity.